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ABSTRACT

Currently, the relationship between second language acquisition (SLA) and foreign language learning (FLL) is unidirectional, with theory and hypotheses flowing from SLA to FLL, and making FLL a subset of SLA. However, this relationship is an artificial one resting on debatable or even incorrect assumptions. These include the assumptions that: (1) SLA has answers to questions about language acquisition; (2) SLA has a truly cross-linguistic perspective; and (3) acquisition is not a research domain of the foreign language profession. The foreign language profession must cease to become simply a consumer of SLA research and theory and become an active contributor. Further, it can be argued that some questions in SLA can be answered best by researching foreign-language, not second-language, learners. In practical terms, English-as-a-Second-Language and foreign language teachers need to seek ways to interact so common aspects of non-primary language teaching can be delineated and pursued jointly. In empirical endeavors, researchers need to cross fields and test hypotheses in other contexts. (MSE)

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Theory and Research in SLA and FLL: on Producers and Consumers

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IDEAL 3, 1988

THEORY AND RESEARCH IN SLA AND FLL:

ON PRODUCERS AND CONSUMERS

Bill VanPatten

Foreign language specialists in the U.S. have sometimes questioned the relevance of second language research while at the same time the foreign language classroom and the foreign language learner have tended to be ignored in research. This situation is particularly important for those interested in building a theory of non-primary language acquisition. In this paper, I examine what can be viewed as a schism between SLA and FLL in the U.S. as well as the producer-consumer relationship which currently exists. I will argue that the assumptions which underly this relationship are faulty and that we need to look toward a new relationship in which FL professionals contribute more actively to theory building in non-primary language acquisition.

INTRODUCTION

In his 1985 book, Understanding Second Language Acquisition, Rod Ellis states, "*Second* language acquisition is not meant to contrast with *foreign* language acquisition. SLA is used as a general term...." He then proceeds to tell us that, "It is, however, an open question whether the way in which acquisition proceeds in these different situations is the same or different" (p. 5). I find this citation somewhat ambivalent and believe it reflects a schizophrenic nature which is not particular to Ellis but to many L2 professionals. On the one hand, we would like to use one term to cover all language acquisition situations. Yet, at the same time, we feel the need to cautiously qualify our term because we have not provided adequate evidence that one term can really be used for all acquisitional environments. What, then, is the relationship between second language acquisition (SLA) and foreign language learning (FLL)?

The relationship between SLA and FLL which I would like to explore in this paper is one involving theory building, that is, a theory about the processes underlying acquisition which in turn relies on empirical research for support.[1] In the theoretical domain we encounter concepts such as input, interaction, the role of universal grammar and so-called "parameter setting," language transfer (identification and causes of), fossilization, socio-affective background, and others. The central questions which underly theory construction in all language acquisition situations are, How and why do people acquire languages?, Which conditions are necessary to language acquisition and which, in contrast, are beneficial?, How can we account for different outcomes? and

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What are the constraints upon language acquisition at different stages of development and where do these constraints come from?

Currently, the relationship between SLA and FLL is a unidirectional one in which theory and hypotheses flow from SLA to FLL. This can be schematized as in Figure 1.

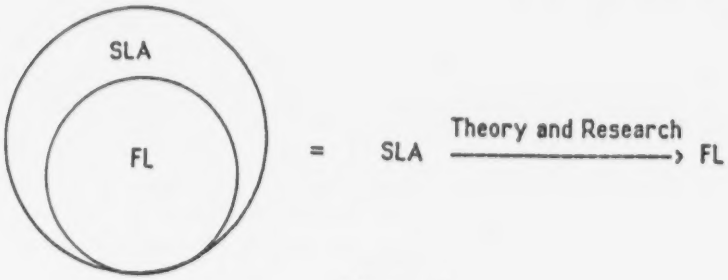

Figure 1
The Producer-Consumer Relationship

In this relationship, FLL is subsumed under SLA and is thought to be some special type of language acquisition context. (Quite unclear in this scheme of things is the relationship between FL, EFL, ESL, untutored SLA, and the formation of pidgins.) Thus, since FLL is a 'subset' of SLA, then whatever is true for SLA must also be true for FLL.

This schematic representation is reminiscent of earlier accounts of the relationship between linguistics and applied linguistics where those in applied linguistics were considered to be consumers of theory and research and were concerned only with practical applications.[2] Thus, those in FL teaching get knowledge from SLA research and theory building and then seek ways in which to manipulate the classroom environment to "improve" instruction.

There are at least three assumptions which underly this relationship:

(1) that SLA has answers to questions about language acquisition;

(2) that SLA has a truly cross-linguistic perspective;

(3) that acquisition is not a research domain of the FL profession.

What I will argue in this paper is that the relationship between SLA and FLL which has dominated the field is an artificial one which rests upon debatable (if not incorrect) assumptions. I will then outline what I perceive should be the

relationship between SLA and FLL and then suggest that only in the FL context can SLA theory find the answers to some rather important questions in theory.

SLA: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

To begin, it is unquestionable that SLA does not have answers to the fundamental questions of non-primary language acquisition. How and why do people acquire languages? is a question which is still unanswered and will probably go unanswered for some time.[3] As is typical of any young field of research, SLA has rightfully spent some 18 years generating question after question, posing more than it has been answering, and thus setting up a research agenda. If we pick up any empirically based research paper, if it is written true to style, it ends with a conclusions/summary section in which the limitations of the research as well as areas in need of future investigation are outlined. What SLA has accomplished in the last decade and a half is to turn our attention away from simplistic accounts of habit formation and L1 transfer and to isolate some of the factors which influence non-primary language acquisition, i.e. anything other than L1 acquisition, thus leading us to ask better questions than could have been asked in previous years.

In order to demonstrate how questions in this field have multiplied over the last decade and half, let us take one factor thought to be essential to language acquisition: communicatively centered input. Since our attention was first focused on input in the mid to late seventies[4] the following questions (not presented in any particular order) have been asked:

(1) Is meaningful input necessary? If so

(2) does it have to be simplified?

(3) does input have to be comprehensible?

(4) does it have to contain i + 1?

(5) is there a silent period?

(6) what out of input becomes intake?

(7) does input have to be negotiated?

(8) does input differ among age groups?

(9) does input differ among cultures?

(10) is meaningful input enough?

(11) and generally, what are the limits of input?

While we could list more questions, I would like to end this demonstration with a citation. In 1985, Susan Gass and Carolyn Madden published a volume titled Input in Second Language Acquisition. In that volume are 25 papers that treat input from either an empirical or a theoretical perspective. The volume concludes with a summary by Larsen-Freeman in which, on the last page, she lists 10 areas (at least) in need of further research. Clearly, we do not have the answers to our questions about communicatively centered input except to say that it is an essential ingredient for language acquisition.

Now, what happens when this particular aspect of SLA is 'applied' to the FL context? The result is a flurry of claims about what should happen in the classroom, e.g. we get 'input methods'. This is not to say that the particular claim that meaningful input should be provided in the classroom is unwarranted. I merely wish to point out that any claim beyond that is quite probably premature. We have yet to really understand how interaction with input results in a language system. That is, we still have not sufficiently filled the gaps in our information about the following chain of events and relationships:

input---> intake---> acquisition---> language use[5]

What I find worthy of concern from this example is that the FL community does not respond with a research agenda about input in the classroom, but responds instead with a consumer's eye focused upon instruction. I do not mean to underestimate nor denigrate the "applicational" aspect of SLA research and theory. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere (VanPatten 1986a and b, 1987a), there are implications for classroom practice derived from SLA research and theory. But these implications are broad in scope and deal more with how teachers should view learners and language rather than how teachers should teach on a day to day basis.

ON THE CROSS-LINGUISTIC NATURE OF SLA RESEARCH

The second assumption underlying SLA theory and research is that it has been truly cross-linguistic. This, like the first assumption, is demonstrably false. If one examines the publications of U.S. based journals that treat non-primary language acquisition, one is struck by the overwhelming proponderence of papers that use learners of English for their data base. If the papers are theoretical rather than research oriented, they use the English language as their source of linguistic data. In the citation made earlier, the volume on input, out of the 25 papers included, only 3 involve looking at learners of languages other than English. With the exception of the cross-linguistic series published by Newbury House and some occasional papers in Studies in Second Language Acquisition, SLA in this country is a theory/research agenda of the acquisition of English.

This observation begs the question, is there any problem with this? I believe that there is, from both a theoretical perspective and a practical perspective. As an example, let us take the claim made in the seventies that the acquisition of morphemic structure was determined by frequency of occurrence in input (Larsen-Freeman 1976). This looks to be the case in a language like English which has five verb inflections and one noun inflection. But what if the data base comes from a typologically different language such as Spanish where morphology plays an important role in marking semantic features of language which in English are marked lexically or by word order? Spanish has some 46 verb inflections, five noun inflections, four forms for the definite article, two copulas, and from 2 to 5 forms of a pronoun for a given person number (dependent upon case and/or syntactic function). In my research on the acquisition of *ser* and *estar* (VanPatten 1985 and 1987b), for example, I have argued that Larsen-Freeman's position on frequency is incorrect with reference to the acquisition of Spanish and that, while certainly important, frequency of occurrence is not the primary factor in morpheme acquisition but instead exists in a hierarchical relationship to other factors. When this perspective is then applied to English morpheme development, we find an alternative explanation which accounts for the same data. Clearly, a cross-linguistic perspective on morpheme acquisition was needed from the beginning.[6]

The FL community, then, assuming that SLA is either cross-linguistic or has justifiable cross-linguistic projections, may accept conclusions based on the data from ESL learners which are not readily applicable to FL teaching or are not adequately explanatory for FLL.

ACQUISITION RESEARCH IN FLL

The third assumption, that acquisition is not a research domain of the FL profession, derives, I believe, from the history of the two disciplines. SLA is firmly established in two disciplines of inquiry: linguistics and psycholinguistics. It has also been linked historically to two related research domains: child language acquisition and pidgins and creoles.

The FL community also has linguistics as its earliest roots (e.g. the backgrounds of Robert Lado, Robert Stockwell, Donald Bowen, William Bull and others). However, these roots were abandoned and replaced with something else: educational research. Sometime in the sixties, schools of education blossomed and soon thereafter special degree programs in foreign language education were born. What then happened is that FL professionals turned their attention away from both what language is and how languages are learned, and focused their attention instead on educational psychology and the manipulation of instruction. While SLA has persevered in a quest for the 'how' and the 'what' of language acquisition, most professionals in FL have either assumed what these were or ignored them. Thus, the processes underlying acquisition

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itself (both psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic) have never really become a focus of inquiry in FL.[7]

I would hasten to add here that I am not suggesting that educational issues are unworthy of attention or that the manipulation of instructional variables is unimportant. Nor do I wish to suggest that the work of those of us who have graduated from schools of education or who are conducting research in educational issues does not merit attention. I merely wish to point out that, for the most part, the FL profession has not been investigating the range of questions about language and language acquisition that have been asked in SLA.[8] The outcome has been a schism between two fields which has resulted in a biased approach to looking at language learning, that is, the overemphasis on English in the case of SLA, and, in the case of FL, an antiquated notion of what language and language acquisition are, most clearly visible in the continued structural-grammatical syllabi of textbooks and courses.[9]

TOWARD A NEW RELATIONSHIP

What I would like to suggest here is that the FL profession needs to put the L of learning back onto FL so that we have both FLL and FL teaching existing side by side. The profession needs to cease being only a consumer of SLA research and theory and start becoming an active contributor. Indeed, it can be argued, that there are some questions asked in SLA that are best answered or even only answerable by researching <u>foreign</u> language learners and not <u>second</u> language learners.

For instance, let us take an empirically testable question such as the following: Is meaningful input itself sufficient to make alterations in a learner's linguistic system over time? If we attempted to investigate this with a rigorous longitudinal study in an L2 context, we would immediately be struck by the confounding variables outside the classroom. What about input sources outside the classroom? How could we control for interaction outside the classroom? How could we control with <u>whom</u> a learner interacts? What about literacy? What about different L1 backgrounds? The list could go on. But, in a foreign language context, these extremely crucial variables are already controlled for us. We could, for example, set up a long term (e.g. two-three year) study where learners are tracked across several different kinds of curricula, one in which meaningful input is the be-all and end-all of the classroom, another in which input is mixed with explicit instruction, another where meaningful input is virtually absent and focus is on production from the earliest stages. In all three contexts, homework and outside exposure are matched to classroom environment. Since we are controlling here for what happens outside of the formal context, we are providing a much more exacting research design than could ever be achieved in an L2 context. It is important to note, however, that we are not testing methodology here, nor teaching variables, but those factors which SLA has already suggested are important in the

construction of any theory of non-primary language acquisition. In addition, by using the FL context we may more easily get at the problems posed by language typologies. I could envision the research just outlined involving English as a FL, Spanish as a FL, German as a FL, and Japanese as a FL. In this way we see typological differences such as whether the language is underlyingly S(ubject) initial or V(erb) initial, whether the language is morphologically rich or poor, whether the language is right or left branching, and whether the language has flexible or rigid word order. In addition, we would be including typological differences that go beyond the sentence level, i.e. discourse differences and communication differences based on the interface between culture and language.

While research of the kind just outlined may be hampered by practical concerns (e.g. funding), the point is that it is the FL context that can eventually serve as the testing ground for some of the hypotheses in SLA. What is clearly needed then is for the theorist-consumer relationship between SLA and FLL to be abandoned and for: (1) the FL profession to promote language acquisition research with research paradigms in developmental psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, discourse interaction and general communication; and (2) for SLA to seek out FL professionals as partners in both research and theory construction. My schematic representation, then, for this relationship would look something like that in Figure 2.

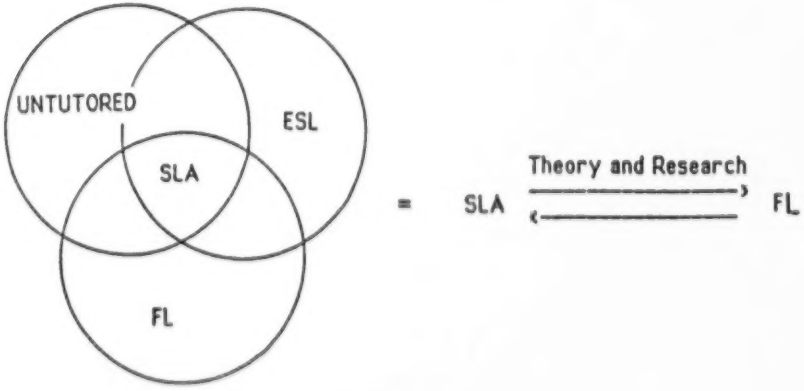

Figure 2
A New Relationship for SLA and FLL

From this scheme, it should be evident that FLL has aspects which are contextually different from other non-primary acquisition types, e.g. the contraints imposed on discourse by the setting. At the same time, FLL overlaps with untutored language acquisition in that there are persons who learn what are typically FLs in this country in an untutored setting somewhere else, e.g. German as an L2 in Germany, French as an

L2 in France. In other areas, FLL overlaps with ESL in the context of English as an FL in such countries as Japan and Colombia.. ESL and untutored language acquisition overlap in areas which are not pertinent to FL, e.g. the acquisition of English in the U.S. without the aid of formal instruction. But central to this entire scheme is that there is a learner who is capable of participating in any of the three contexts. It is what that learner does that is common to all contexts which forms the core of SLA theory and thus, in Figure 2, SLA is placed in the small area where all three contexts overlap . In a certain sense, we could even suggest that a theory of SLA must be a product of research in different contexts of non-primary language acquisition rather than a precursor.

What can we do to help build bridges? On the practical side, ESL and FL teachers need to seek ways in which to interact such that common aspects of non-primary language teaching can be delineated, e.g. instead of meeting independently, there might be joint meetings of various regional and national Fl organizations and ESL organizations.[10] We might encourage those currently pursuing teaching degrees in a language to also pursue a minor in the other discipline, e.g. FL majors with ESL minors.

On the empirical side, researchers need to cross fields and test hypotheses in other contexts, e.g. we could set up special panels and colloquia at the Second Language Research Forum, at the annual international TESOL meeting, or at the biennial gathering of the Association de Linguistique Appliqueé. In such contexts, both L2 and FL researchers could provide their perspectives and/or empirical research on various issues of SLA. And most importantly from my perspective as a professional in FL, the FL community needs to offer theory testing research to SLA. Perhaps research interest sections, modeled upon the TESOL interest sessions could become integral parts of the annual meetings of various FL organizations such as the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. Hopefully, if such joint ventures are pursued, Ellis' need for caution in terminology will be obviated and someday we might even arrive at a comprehensive theory of non-primary language acquisition.

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NOTES

[1]There are, of course, other relationships to explore as suggested by the different persons invited to speak at the SLA-FLL conference. For example, see Savignon (this volume).

[2]For some discussion, see Corder (1973) and Wardhaugh and Brown (1976).

[3]In this discussion of non-primary language acquisition, I am ignoring the first language concepts of UG (Universal Grammar) and the idea that language development is a species specific phenomenon tied into the genetic makeup of humans.

[4]While Krashen is the name most associated with input, the beginnings of a concern for input can be traced back to Corder (1973), Wagner-Gough and Hatch (1975) and Hatch (1978).

[5]See, for example, the discussion in Chaudron (1985), Sharwood-Smith (1986), and VanPatten (in press).

[6]I do not mean to suggest that my account of frequency is the only possible alternative to Larsen-Freeman's. Instead I am simply demonstrating how a cross-linguistic perspective on general language phenomenon like morphology offers competing viewpoints on acquisition. See also VanPatten 1987a.

[7]This is perhaps a good point at which to show how strong this perception is of what FL professionals should be doing. Recently two colleagues, James F. Lee and Trisha Dvorak, and I published a volume titled Foreign Language Learning. While published in February 1987, the volume was begun in the Spring of 1985. Our intention was to bring learning into sharper focus in the FL community and to promote research on foreign language learning (hence FLL in the title). The result was a volume with eleven research papers. This volume was categorically rejected by every publisher who had anything to do with promoting foreign language professional books in this country and was finally published by Newbury House. The point of this anecdote is to demonstrate that in the mid 1980s, we had difficulty publishing a book focused on foreign language

learning in this country because, as one publisher told us, "there was no audience for it."

[8]Interestingly, one often hears FL professionals lamenting that researchers in SLA ignore educational concerns or, as is generally said, researchers ignore those 'in the trenches.'

[9]It should be pointed out here that these remarks were delivered in a forum dominated by Northamericans. I do not presume that structural-grammatical syllabi are the dominant syllabi in the rest of the world though they well may be.

[10]When I presented these remarks at the SLA-FLL conference in Urbana, I began with an on-the-spot survey in which I called for a show of hands from the 140 participants. How many people have taught both ESL and FL? How many are engaged in research at this moment? How many go to specific professional gatherings in the U.S.? The results of this straw poll confirmed my suspicions. Only a few people had been instructors of both ESL and FL, and while a handful of persons claimed to be going to the Second Language Research Forum or to the annual TESOL meeting, no ESL person claimed to be going to a major national foreign language meeting such as that hosted by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreing Languages. Finally, twice as many ESL persons indicated that they were engaged in current research.

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